WHAT MUSEUMS MIGHT BE

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The Listener

WHAT MUSEUMS MIGHT BE

Many people are convinced that our museums are not yet playing the important part that they might in our national cultural life. Yet 'Brighter Museums', in closer touch with current developments in art, literature, social life and education, are possible if we heed the advice given by such experts as Sir Henry Miers and Mr. S. F. Markham, who have in recent years visited every museum in the British Isles and Canada, and a great number in the United States, the Continent of Europe, Africa and India

Introductory Note

By SIR HENRY MIERS, President, Museums Association

THE name 'Museum' is a forbidding one to many people on account of old associations. 'Give a dog a bad name and hang him'. In some towns it might have been said, not so long ago, 'Call a building a museum and burn it'. Those to whom the name merely revives a recollection of miscellaneous objects crowded in dusty glass cases do not know what a remarkable transformation has taken place in all the better museums in this country. Instead of mixed collections, exhibited with no definite purpose in buildings which are only storehouses, they are now (with some bad exceptions) becoming as real and vital an instrument of education as the public library. They send out collections to the schools; children visit them from the schools; they are bright and attractive; their exhibits are well displayed and are explained by interesting and instructive labels. It is a pity that some other word has not been invented to describe this new type of institution.

An admirable pamphlet has just been issued by the Board of Education (No. 87) entitled *Museums and the Schools*. This is really the first time that the Board has made an official pronouncement about the educational value of museums from the school point of view. Hitherto the connection between school and museum has been very much a matter of personal arrangement between curator and school-teacher.

Far too little is known of the wide-spread nature of this revolution and of the new and promising educational service which is growing up not only in England but in many countries. In America (which has led the way in this new development) there are a great number of museums mainly devoted to educational work. The famous 'German Museum' at Munich is the most conspicuous example of the new ideal.

The Museums Association of Great Britain, with the help of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, is now conducting a survey of all the museums and galleries of the British Empire, and it is already quite clear that even though in many places the obsolete idea of the public museum still survives, the new spirit is beginning to manifest itself, and will, it may be hoped, shortly dominate the whole position. No publication, however, has yet appeared which presents a world survey of the new activities; the following article by Mr. Markham is perhaps the first attempt to convey some general idea of the situation in the various countries of the world. The interpretation to which this leads in terms of their intellectual development is, for the first time, brought out in an original fashion by Mr. Markham.

The museums and art galleries in Great Britain contain a vast amount of most valuable material; we have to see that really good use is made of it. For this purpose, all the modern facilities for bringing knowledge within the reach of the public should be utilised; in the forefront of these stand the resources of the British Broadcasting Corporation.

If our public collections have been employed too little for educational purposes in the past, let us make known as widely as possible what they can do now for those who are willing to use them. It is here that the aid of the British Broadcasting Corporation may be invoked. If the people interested in a given subject can learn through the B.B.C. what the museums in their neighbourhood possess that can help them, talks and lectures can be provided; and if the curators can, through the same medium, ascertain what lectures or classes are being held, special exhibits can, no doubt, be arranged. Better still, if a series of educational talks can be instituted by the Corporation over the whole country and sufficient notice given of them beforehand, the curators will be able, in every town where there is a museum or art gallery, to direct students to the appropriate exhibits and to arrange special displays to illustrate these talks. Some such scheme would be an immense educational force throughout the country, and would enable teachers and curators to co-operate in a manner which has never before been possible.

Treasure Houses of the Nation

By S. F. MARKHAM, Secretary, Museums Association

DON'T bother to pay war debts to America, just hand over to us gradually the contents of your superb art galleries and museums!'

That was the suggestion of a very bold American, who pointed out that if Germany could pay neither France nor Great Britain reparations and War debts, and if in consequence Great Britain could not pay America the £50,000,000 a year interest and principal which is due, then Great Britain should make an equivalent yearly sacrifice from the treasures of art and jewels in our galleries and museums. It was affirmed that the contents of two or three departments of the British Museum alone would be worth £50,000,000. Just one exhibit, or rather a series of exhibits, the Elgin Marbles, has been valued at £2,000,000 or £3,000,000, and there is no doubt that they would fetch this sum if sold at a good period. They are, in fact, the finest remains of Greek sculpture anywhere in the world, and originally formed part of the Parthenon, or temple of the virgin goddess Athena, at Athens.

The treasures of the British Museum might satisfy this particular American for two or three years; other great national treasure houses, such as the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, etc., might keep him happy for another dozen years or so. Six pictures in the National Gallery alone are worth nearly £2,500,000; two that were bought by us only two years ago—the Cornaro Titian and the Wilton Diptych—would fetch over £200,000 in the open market. And then the rich galleries of Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, etc., would probably tide us over until 1960, and the

lesser collections in 400 other centres might see the whole of our American debt finally extinguished.

Well over a century ago, old Blucher remarked of London, 'What a city to loot!' It is rather tempting to imagine what he would think not only of London to-day, but of the treasures of many of our provincial cities. But I fancy the average Englishman—and even the average Scotsman too—would rather see another 6d. added to our income-tax than that our priceless national treasures should be dispersed to the four corners of the globe. Even if the contents of our incomparable museums and art galleries are worth millions and millions of pounds, their real value lies not in pounds, shillings and pence, but in the way they make life more beautiful and richer for each and every one of us who cares to visit them.

Take just one small museum, Keats House at Hampstead; go there, and get the real thrill of intimacy with genius that it gives; think then how your whole appreciation of Keats' work is intensified by actual contact with the things that he handled and loved. Remember also how in turn you pass on, or have endeavoured to pass on, the knowledge and the inspiration that such a visit gives.

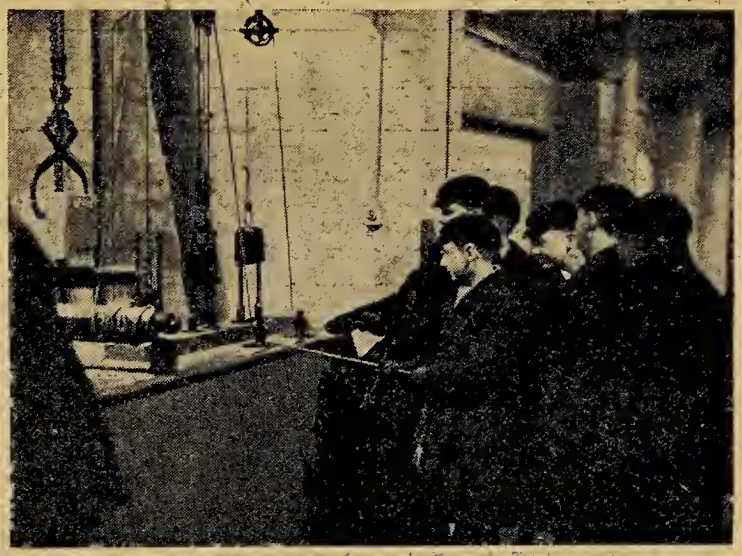
Or go to the Natural History Museum at South Kensington, go upstairs to the first floor, and see there a single case, not four feet square, in which are exhibited dull and uninteresting rocks. One is instructed to press a handle lighting a quartz lamp, which brings out in a marvellous way some of the hitherto unknown glories of minerals. Grey rock, instead of being dull and uninteresting, becomes vivid and colourful—fluorspar glows bluish-violet, zinc-blende burns a fierce gold, calc-spar becomes suffused with a delicate rose-red. And then the handle slips back—grey predominates; but always one will remember that drab minerals are full of colour and can be made to glow with exquisite tints if only a sympathetic touch is given to the handle that the

Children examining the anatomy of a flea at the National History Museum, South Kensington

stones may reveal their inner glowing selves ablaze with fluorescence. What an opportunity for a moralist!

Or take a trip to the United Services Museum and see there day by day the crowds of children, eager-eyed and alert, drinking in the heroic stories of the Motherland, and incidentally realising that luck does not win battles, but science and courage.

Or, again, visit the Science Museum, and devote an afternoon to one small gallery that was opened a month ago—the Children's Gallery where hordes of children every day see displayed before them the evolution of lighting, the evolution of transport, and machinery of all kinds. Watch them turn the handles, and hear them argue. The value of that gallery alone, the smallest of dozens, is incalculable in terms of education or culture.



Schoolboys testing the old fashioned weight-lifting machines in the new Children's Gallery of the Science Museum at South Kensington

Improving Museum Service

To assess museums in these terms, the contribution which they make to the uplifting of the present generation, is the only right one; and I venture to say that of all the educational forces in this country there is none potentially greater than museums. Schools and libraries have their uses, but schools and books both can only *tell* the child about the queer things and the real things of the world; in a museum, that is to say the right sort of museum, he can see for himself, teach himself, and such knowledge is the finest knowledge he can get. I forget who it was who said that 'we remember 30 per cent. only of what we read, but 70 per cent. of what we see'; but he was right. You can read about a sunset until you need spectacles, but to see one for a minute is to be entranced with the beauties of a fleeting panorama that cannot adequately be described in the bondage of words. Similarly one could read for days about the Battle of Waterloo, but to see the battlefield or a large scale model such as there is at the United Services Museum is to learn more in twenty minutes than a book can give you in a day. It is the same with natural history. Imagine anyone trying to learn what the sheen of minerals is like from a written account; or take engineering—just try telling a young friend what a carburettor does and see if she or he understands. Each and every subject in turn, excepting only perhaps mathematics and languages, can best be taught by sight and touch.

Now it is an unfortunate fact that this glorious educational ideal has not been quite so strongly visualised by all museums and art galleries as one would have hoped. Sir Henry Miers, in his Report to the Carnegie United Kingdom Trustees on British Public Museums in 1928, quotes a case of a curator, one of our few septuagenarian curators, who was conducting a class of twenty boys around his museum. 'As they were led past poorly labelled, overcrowded birds in dim wall cases he called out in succession "thrush"—"starling"—"ptarmigan"—"bird of paradise". The superintendent in the rear instructed the boys to "write it down, write it down, and keep away from the cases". After fifteen minutes of this treatment they were hurried off by him with the remark, "And now, boys, for the tertiary fossils" '.

These boys were given scarcely a moment to see, still less the opportunity to handle. But supposing they could have seen and touched, supposing that this could have been preceded or followed by cinema demonstrations of ptarmigans nesting, flying, feeding—what a different impression on the boy!

The Great Adventure—a first visit to the British Museum

Small wonder that Sir Henry Miers, in his masterly report, strongly advocated drastic changes in certain parts of our museum service. He urged, for instance, that every museum should adopt, instead of a policy of indiscriminate acquisition, a definite restricted policy based on the maximum service that it can render to its own district. Again, he urged that every local museum should have a full-time, well-qualified curator, and that much more attention should be paid to the educational side of museum work. Other recommendations went to the heart of certain technical difficulties: and others dealt with difficult problems of co-operation.

It is pleasing to know that many of his recommendations have, through the magnificent co-operation of the Museums Association, the Carnegie United Kingdom Trustees, and the museum authorities themselves, now been put into operation, and it is perhaps a pardonable boast to say that our museum service is now the best in the world, except in three specific directions.

The United States still leads the way with regard to children's museums, and also in regard to 'trailside' museums established in their great national parks to serve at once as picnic and tourist centres and great educational factors in the teaching of natural history. Sweden and Germany together lead the way in folk-lore museums; every town in Germany and Sweden, in fact, has its historical collections housed in an appropriate historic building. In these three directions we have to hand the palm to foreigners.

Every country in the world now has a museum service of some kind—even Iceland and Java have excellent collections, and it has now become possible, through the researches of the Museums Association, to produce a comparative table showing the distribution of museums in all lands. It is, of course,

Where Museums Cluster Thickest

About three-quarters of the World's Museums are concentrated in the shaded areas shown in this map. Within the European circle, of 600 miles radius from Bremen, are nearly one-half of the World's Museums

impossible for this table to be absolutely accurate, since national ideas of museums vary, and I, for one, find great difficulty in drawing the line between museums and certain Italian churches with their magnificent art collections, or Japanese temples and shrines, or even some of our English period houses such as Shakespeare's birthplace; but I think I can say that no pains have been spared to make the following table as accurate as possible.

A WORLD COMPARISON OF MUSEUMS

Country	Population*	No. of museums	Main authority†	Approximate average population per museum
Sweden ..	6,150,000	180	Macc.	34,000
Germany ..	63,000,000	1,700	D.J.B., Macc.	37,000
Switzerland ..	4,100,000	96	,,	42,600
Austria	6,600,000	140	,,	47,000
Norway ..	2,810,000	58	Macc.	49,000
Holland ..	8,000,000	127	I.I.	64,000
France	41,800,000	650	,,	64,000
New Zealand ..	1,461,000	21	M.A.	70,000
Great Britain & N. Ireland ..	44,500,000	583	,,	76,000
Belgium ..	8,000,000	104	,,	77,000
Denmark ..	3,560,000	46	Macc.	77,000
Canada	10,354,000	123	M.A.	84,000
Finland ..	3,640,000	46	Macc.	90,000
Czechoslovakia	14,730,000	163	D.J.B., Macc.	90,000
United States ..	137,000,000	1,370	A.A.M.	100,000
Italy	43,000,000	420	M.A.	102,000
Spain	21,000,000	200	,,	105,000
Australia ..	6,000,000	50	,,	120,000
Hungary ..	8,700,000	73	Macc.	121,000
Baltic States ..	5,116,000	32	,,	160,000
South Africa ..	8,000,000	50	M.A.	160,000
Poland	31,000,000	155	I.I.	200,000
Irish Free State	3,000,000	14	M.A.	220,000
Balkans	46,500,000	177	Macc.	262,000
Japan	84,000,000	168	J.Y.B., M.A.	500,000
Russia in Europe	108,000,000	170	Macc.	641,000
South America	79,000,000	100	A.A.M.	790,000
Egypt	14,000,000	16	M.A.	850,000
Russia in Asia ..	29,750,000	30	Macc.	990,000
India	353,000,000	90	M.A.	3,900,000
China ..	449,000,000	100	,,	4,490,000

It is a shock to Americans and to Englishmen to find that Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Norway lead the way with a museum for every 40,000 inhabitants; the Teutonic peoples, in fact, have a keener sense of museum values than any other. The figures for Great Britain would be much higher but for the fact that no fewer than two hundred

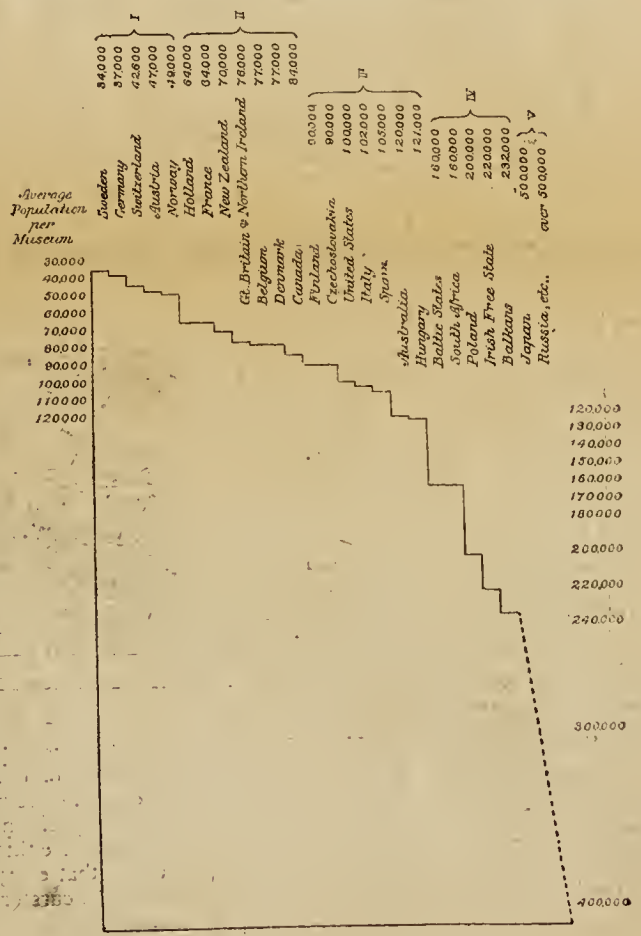


Diagram classifying the principal countries of the World according to their provision of museums

towns of over 20,000 population have no museum service, a state of affairs that certainly is not to be found in Sweden or Germany. The most remarkable instances of a lack of adequate

*These figures are from *Whitaker's Almanac*, 1932, except France and Canada, for which later figures are available.
†M.A.—Museums Association; A.A.M.—American Association of Museums; I.I.—Institute of Intellectual Co-operation; D.J.B.—*Jahrbuch des Deutsches Museums* J.Y.B.—*Year Book of Japanese Art*; Macc.—Mæcenas; *Minerva* and *Europa* have also been utilised

Blind children studying at the American Museum of Natural History, New York City

local museum service are to be found at the following towns, all of which have a population of over 60,000:

Croydon	233,000
Willesden	184,000
East Ham	142,000
Rhondda	141,000
Walthamstow	132,000
Ilford	131,000
Leyton	128,000
Ealing	117,000
Hendon	115,000
Wallasey	97,000
Hornsey	95,000
Dagenham	89,000
Smethwick	84,000
Edmonton	77,000
Heston and Isleworth	75,000
Stockton-on-Tees	67,000
Enfield	67,000
Tynemouth	64,000
Chesterfield	64,000

These towns just prevent us from equalling Sweden or Germany in museum facilities, and deprive us of our place in the first group of museum countries.

The second group of countries, those which have a museum for roughly every 60,000 or 70,000 people, is mainly Anglo-Saxon, including New Zealand, Great Britain, and Canada; but the group also contains Holland, France, Denmark and Belgium.

The third group, where museums will be found for every 100,000 population, includes Finland, Czechoslovakia, and the United States well up in the list, whilst Italy, Spain, Australia and Hungary bring up the rear. Ireland and South Africa, however, are well down in the fourth group—those which have a museum to every 200,000 population—where they keep company with the Balkans and West Central European countries. The last group, those countries which have few museums, includes Russia, South and Central America, Japan, India, China and Egypt. All these last-named, however, have remarkable art and archæological collections, but they are centred in the large cities, and the use of museums does not appear to be appreciated by the smaller cities and towns.

Landmarks of Progress

Another look at the above table, and a still deeper enquiry into the actual situation of museums, brings out two more very surprising facts. The first is, that of the 8,000 museums in the world more than half are concentrated in an area barely 1,200 miles across. If a circle be drawn with a radius of 600 miles, having Osnabrück or Hanover, in Germany, as its centre, it will be found to include all the important museums of Ireland (excepting only Cork), Scotland, England, Wales, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, West Poland (including Warsaw), West Czechoslovakia, West Hungary, Austria, North Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, and all France except the Pyrenean area. In all, well over 4,000 museums are concentrated in this tiny area of the world's surface. Of the remaining 3,900, nearly a quarter are to be found concentrated in another small area of the globe—the Great Lakes-Atlantic Seaboard area of North America. If a five-sided figure be drawn to include St. Louis, Milwaukee, Montreal, Boston and Delaware State, it will be found to include nearly two-thirds of the museums of Canada and half the museums of the United States—in all, nearly a thousand museums are contained in an area 1,200 miles long and barely 500 miles wide. These two areas are, singularly enough, the two most progressive areas of the world's surface.

As a general rule, it will be found that wherever the purely Teutonic or Anglo-Saxon races are concentrated in the greatest numbers, there the museum movement will be found to be most flourishing, and it is rather extraordinary that this works out with a kind of mathematical accuracy. In other words, the odds are that wherever 40,000 Teutons or 70,000 Anglo-Saxons are gathered together, whether in a single township or spread over a province, they will have a museum, and if there be more than this number, museums will increase in almost exact proportion.

The United States, with her population of 137,000,000, has 1,370 public museums, but if her non-Nordic stock be deducted, it will be found that there is a museum for every 70,000 of Nordic stock.* Canada, with a population of over 10,000,000, has 123 museums; again take away her negroes, Asiatics, etc., and you have a museum per 70,000 population. France, of course, is the brilliant exception to any such computation, but, generally speaking, in areas where Latins or Eastern Europeans predominate, the proportion is much less.

Children studying Red Indian life by handling exhibits at Rochester Museum, New York

By contrast with these areas in which the white races are dominant, those in which the white races have exercised a very considerable cultural influence would appear to be the next

*In 1930, there were 11,000,000 negroes and 240,000 Asiatics in the U.S.A. The foreign-born population of Celtic, Levantine and West European stock numbered nearly 7,000,000. It seems impossible to secure accurate information as to those American-born citizens who are purely descended from these stocks, but it is estimated at over 15,000,000. Mexicans and South American stocks account for another million

'Human heredity can be improved only by a wise selection of parents for the next generation. You can improve the human race by falling in love intelligently'. Words fail an Englishman when he sees things like this in a museum. But the lesson gets home, and it is small wonder that this particular museum is one of the most popular in America, even if it is startling to a mere European.

At another new American museum, that at Trenton, New Jersey, which for beauty of interior design and presentation exhibits is probably unequalled among the smaller museums, they have developed the extremely novel idea of having loan collections of live animals. Guinea pigs, white rats, snakes, turtles, and parakeets are lent out to children, apparently without injury either to the animals or the children.

Topicality in the Museum

Buffalo in New York State also teaches us how broadcasting and museums may be linked up into a vigorous educational factor. Every month special newspaper supplements, copiously illustrated, are prepared to synchronise with talks over the wireless. Almost every conceivable subject, from art to engineering, can be, and in fact has been, treated by Buffalo in this manner, including subjects so diverse as sculpture and Mendel's law.

It is a pleasing thought that already proposals are being considered for the linking up of some of the finest B.B.C. talks with museum and school demonstrations early this year. The first proposal is that for a series of talks in the B.B.C.'s summer programme a score or so of our best museums shall arrange a parallel series of exhibits; and that THE LISTENER, with its articles and illustrations, shall further emphasise the salient points of these talks.

The Travelling Museum—The Board of Education of St. Louis, Missouri, circulates and lends museum specimens and books to schools and institutions, delivering them by motor van

There is, indeed, much to be done before we can claim first place in all the various aspects of museum activities, and it seems to me that five or six urgent fundamental things require to be done in several of our museums before we can hope to attain all-round excellence.

The first is, as Sir Henry Miers and others have so often said, that there should be appointed to every museum a first-class, well-qualified curator. It is certainly not to our credit that in nearly 100 of our museums there is no one who answers to this description. Priceless collections are cared for by 'caretakers', or by overworked librarians, with sad results all round.

Secondly, curators should be paid adequate salaries. Apart from our leading national and provincial museums, the salary scales for curators are disgraceful. I have before me a list showing the so-called 'salaries' that some municipal corporations pay their curators—the average level is well below that of the Burnham scale for teachers!

Thirdly, every museum should define its policy so as to give the greatest educational advantages to the area in which it is situated. Some museum committees still think it their duty to accept everything that may be offered—no matter whether it be a bird of paradise or an assegai. It would appear that the ideal sequence for a local museum might be somewhat on the following lines:

1. The land—its soil, minerals and topographical features.
2. The vegetable products—grasses, vegetables, fruits, timbers.
3. The fauna of the area.
4. The effect of these three factors upon the history of the area—*e.g.*, early developments and more recent economic features.
5. The cultural characteristics of the area—*e.g.*, art, education, and government.

Providing for the Research Worker

Fourthly, research should be given much more attention. At the moment all sorts of difficulties are placed in the way of research students—more than half of our museums have no place where such a student can work, reserve collections are often stored in basements, and there is no means of ascertaining the whereabouts of cognate material except by the most laborious enquiries. Quite recently two cases have been brought to my notice that bear out this statement. One student was making a special study of feathered Hawaiian capes—those beautiful robes of dignity which are becoming scarcer and scarcer, and another—a distinguished archæologist—was desirous of obtaining the fullest possible information regarding Moslem objects bearing Arabic inscriptions or Moslem coats-of-arms. Both found that there was no 'subject-index' of the contents of our museums in existence; both found that the staffs of great national museums were singularly unaware as to the contents or even the whereabouts of smaller museums scattered up and down the country; both found that their only means of approach was to write letters to certain newspapers and *The Museums Journal*, and to hope that the information would then pour in. Fortunately, in both cases, much information was secured through this last-named method, but there are hundreds of research workers at universities, and elsewhere in this country, who, not knowing the ropes, find their tasks rendered much more difficult owing to the lack of a comprehensive subject-index. Such a work would involve a detailed contents survey of each of our museums and then the grouping of these contents under the five great main headings of art, archæology, natural history, science and industry. Under these headings there would, of course, be sub-divisions—as, for instance, under archæology, there would be special sections for British archæology with its sub-sections for Roman, Saxon, Mediæval, Tudor, Elizabethan, etc., and every museum that had any objects of the given period would be listed. Thus a student could ascertain almost at a glance the whereabouts of every collection in this country dealing with his particular subject.

We have already seen what an effect a given concentration of material has upon research workers, for the Flemish, Persian, French and other exhibitions recently held in London have produced an amazing series of books on those subjects which certainly have added to the world's knowledge. It becomes, in fact, almost easy to write a thesis when all the material is in front of one, and the great function of such a subject-index would be to enable the student to effect his own comparisons with the minimum waste of time.

We have, indeed, the richest treasure houses in the world, and a really zealous body of men in our curators who, in spite of low salaries and often very difficult working conditions, are doing their utmost to make them better in every way, so that any adult or any child may find them real Tom Tiddler's grounds from which may be garnered the gold of education and the gossamer threads of beauty.

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